

076: Your Voice is Louder than Words: Interview with Todd Henry

[Music Playing]

T People talk about finding your voice, finding your voice, as if it's something we go out in the backyard and you sort of dig up, uncover a treasure chest and open it up and say, "Ah, I found my voice," right? But the reality is your voice is developed in layers over the course of time. And the reality is people experience your voice in layers.

[Music Playing]

A Welcome to *The Portfolio Life* with Jeff Goins. I'm your host, Andy Traub, and this is the show that helps you pursue work that matters, make a difference with your art, and discover your true voice. Todd Henry is worried that you're settling. That's why he wrote *Louder than Words*, his latest book that helps the reader find their voice and communicate it clearly. In this episode of *The Portfolio Life* Jeff and Todd explore deep ideas like exercising act of patience where we stop back and look at our work on a regular basis. Authenticity, where we're honest about our dedication to our work; uniqueness to what sets us apart from others; and vision, the impact we have. And there's more. So, here's Todd Henry and Jeff Goins.



[Music Playing]

J Todd, it is an honor to have on the other side of the mic.

T Oh, come on. The honor is mine [laughing].

J You're right. The honor is yours. I'll let you take that.

T Thank you so much.

J Man, I love interviewing podcasters, because everything sounds crisp and clean and well-done. You sound phenomenal.

T Thank you. I've been doing this for 10 years—

J Wow!

T —and what I've learned is that — over the course of time that sounding great can overcome a myriad of flaws. So, that's what I try to do whenever I can.

J You look great, too. I've seen you in person. You just keep – the years just keep bringing better stuff out of you. OK. Well, I guess enough flirting.

T [Laughing].

J You've been podcasting for 10 years?

T I have. You know—

J Like the Internet hasn't even been around for 10 years.

T/J [Both laughing]

T It has. Yeah, it has. Yeah, it's funny. I went back and looked at the first date on the first podcast, and it was – which by the way is not publicly available anymore, because it was absolutely horrible. But I probably should put it up there just so people can kind of see the difference. But, yeah, it was in 2005 is when I started podcasting. And at that time when you released a podcast if someone wanted to listen to it, they had to take their i-pod which was like this big clunky deck of cards looking thing, and they had to plug it in via Fire Wire to their computer and sync up their i-tunes library so they could listen to your podcast. Times have changed dramatically in the last 10 years. But, yeah, it's been really fun to see how podcasting has become such an amazing platform vehicle to share ideas.

J Yeah, the i-pod was like a brick. I mean it was – inmates would smuggle them into prisons to use as weapons, bludgeoning devices.

T What's funny is my first .mp3 player – you know, the i-pod was not the first .mp3 player. So, I'm going to sound like an old man now, because I am an old man. My first .mp3 player was this thing, it was called the Nomad Jukebox. And it was the first thing I ever ordered on Amazon.com. Because I went back and looked at it. Having this conversation was the first thing I ever ordered. And what's really funny about the Nomad Jukebox is it looked like a Discman. You know, those CD players that you would carry around—

J Yeah.

T —and put in your pocket?

J Of course.

T I was thinking why if it's a hard-drive-based thing, why would you make it look like a Discman? Why would you shape – it's like rounded on one side and flat on the other just like you would put a compact disc in there. That is so weird that they would do that. Then I thought, they were probably trying to send some kind of visual cue to people that, "Oh, this is a music player just like the big Discman that you carry around in your pocket." Or whatever, you know? Like that's what this is. I thought, "That's really weird." It's kind of like when they made cars for the first time, and they kind of made them look like carriages, horse carriages.

J Yeah.

T You know? Because they wanted to show people, "Hey, this is something that takes you from Point A to Point B. So, anyway. That was kind of funny.

J I think it was Seth Godin who was talking about silk. You know almond milk, milk substitutes, and you don't actually have to refrigerate it. And the sales for that were just abysmal when the product first came out.

T Hum.

J And now, I mean, it's sort of come almond milk, soy milk, whatever, nondairy substitutes are pretty commonplace. And, then, he talked about when they decided to make the marketing decision to put a carton of silk in the milk aisle, and things just exploded. Because it was that association that you're talking about. "OK, I see milk. I see milk made with almonds. I'm going to get that." And that was that association. So, I think there is something to that.

T Yeah, absolutely. Well, we need context. People need context, right—

J Yeah.

T When you communicate, they need to know where to put the pin on the map. And you sometimes have to – as a writer, right, you have to do that. You have to provide context for people. You have to show them where to put the pin on the map. It might be really great work, really great writing, but they don't have any context for it, then a lot of times people will just ignore it.

J Yeah, and I think, Todd, that you do really well. I think you're sensitive to whatever audience you're in front of, whether you're speaking, podcasting, blogging, whatever, taking big ideas – and I still maintain that my favorite thing about you is you quote Thomas Merton in a book about marketing and creativity—

T [Laughing]

J —you've got my respect any time you can bring a Trappist monk into a business conversation, I think you're going deep.

T Only a Trappist monk.

J Only.

T That's the only time you can do that, then you really are sending a signal.

J I mean, if you're doing a Franciscan monk, or something, let's be honest, you're just pandering.

T [Laughing]

J So, one of the things I appreciate about you is how you take big ideas, and then you connect them to a lot of different context. And, so, as a writer, I'm familiar with this term *voice*, the unique expression. And I like defining voice not just as the way that you talk about things, or the way you like to communicate, but resonance. And in reading your most recent book *Louder than Words*, I see some connections. I had a good idea, because it's the same idea as Todd Henry. But when I say *voice*, you've done it again where you've taken something that could apply to a lot of different contexts and, I think, laid it out in a very compelling way. When I say *voice*, what does that mean to you?

T So, your voice is how your collective body of works speaks. And I think it speaks louder than your words even. Even, honestly, then any individual action that you may do, right? So, when people consider you, what is it that they think about you? And I think that is, you know, that's a really difficult thing to wrestle down. People talking about "finding your voice, finding your voice," as if it's something we go out in the backyard, and you dig up, uncover a treasure chest, and open it up, and say, "Ah, I found my voice," right? But the reality is that your voice is developed in layers over the course of time. And the reality is that people experience your voice in layers. They encounter you in layers. And, so, that's why it's really important, I think, Jeff, for anyone who is making something and wants to have impact in the world to really consider, what is it that I'm making? What is the impact I'm aiming for, and how am I shaping my work, and my communication, and how I approach my life, and how I approach my days even in terms of how – the ethic with which I approach my work so that my body of work is speaking with a voice that's representative of who I am and what I really care about? And, unfortunately, my experience, especially in the marketplace, because that's where I spend a lot of my time, right? Is with people and teams who are trying to go to work and create great stuff every day. But they're under a lot of pressure to do that. My experience is that so many people, over the course of time, begin to comply and conform, and compromise in small ways who they are. And that foundation for their work to the point that they very quickly begin building someone else's body of work, and they very quickly begin building a body of work that is very representative of the middle, very representative of mediocrity. And it's unfortunate to me, because I see people very sharp, amazing edges getting sort of rounded off to the point where they just over the course of time settle in. And, so, what I really wanted to do with a lot of the words is challenge people to persist, and to engage on a daily basis in shaping, and honing, and refining, and developing a voice that is compelling, and resonant, and represents them much like, obviously, you did in *The Art of Work*. And it's kind of funny how these threads, or these themes, kind of goes through culture, right? And you find that many of us are kind of tuned into the same frequency at the same time. So, I think that's really kind of cool how we were exploring very similar themes at the same time.

J Let's talk about the journey of developing your voice. Because I like this idea that you don't go in the backyard and find your voice. I also like the idea that it takes work to develop it. Something that I see writers do sometimes is they take a break, or take time off. And, then, like they are waiting for the muse to come kiss them with fairy dust on their eyes or something. And that's just not my experience. I get that. I respect that. If you've got to like take Sabbatical or take some time off, that's fine. But writing for me is work, and I love what Jon Acuff said recently, "You don't wait to find your voice so that you can write. You write to find your voice."

So, what does that journey look like? And, obviously, we're talking about not just applying to writing, or communication, but as you said, your whole body of work, the way that you express really who you are and what you want to do with your gifts, talents, and skills.

T It's interesting. I think it's a combination of active, which sort of implies that we're moving, we're doing stuff on a daily basis. But active patience, meaning that we're also stepping back pretty frequently, and we're observing what's working, what's not, what's resonating, what's not, what's consistent with who I am, what do I kind of feel crappy about, because I know it's not really my best work or it's not representative of me. The problem is, we often act. You tell artists, "Hey, go out and do your work." And Steve Pressfield has obviously done. I think what we need to do is have a bell, Jeff, every time one of us references Steven Pressfield—

J Yeah, ding.

T —you know, “ding,” every time we do that. And it would be like 500 times every time I’m interviewed, or I’m sure you are. But this message of apply butt to chair and sit down and make the clickety-clack and create words on the page. That’s a very important message. And we have to be doing that. But I think often what we compromise when we do that is we don’t step back, and we don’t look at what’s working, what’s not. What’s reflective of me, what’s not. And I think it’s that active contemplation that’s important. I think we also have to have practices in our life where we step back, and we look at, “Where is my work reflecting the best of who I am?” Versus, “Where am I maybe settling in, where am I compromising in ways that I’m not going to be proud of later?”

[Music Playing]

J So, you mentioned working with people, especially in the corporate world, where you are part of something where initially you were really excited about it, a passion about it, and I’ve seen this even with solo entrepreneurs. And you get a few months, or a few years, into it and, as you said, the work starts to stagnate, and you realize this is not the best reflection of who you really are. And so you wake up. You go, “Oh, my gosh, I have to rediscover my voice,” or, “I’ve got to tap back into that authentic self and do work that matters to me and actually reflects my values and what I’m about.” So, I imagine in any journey there are going to be obstacles. There are going to be hurdles. What are some of those hurdles that we can anticipate?

T Unquestionably, yeah. In the book I talk about this amazing artist named Lisa Congdon told me in an interview her art teacher said that every creative endeavor, every project, every business, everything that we try to start that’s difficult for us has a U-shape, right? We start off on one side of the U, and everything is clear. It’s almost like you’re hiking down through a valley, and you look across the valley, and you can see the other side. It’s beautiful, and everything seems so clear. You can see the path below you. And as you begin to hike down the valley, or you begin to engage in the hard work necessary to get to your objective, things become less clear. And the path is more obscured. And it’s kind of rocky terrain. It’s really difficult. And you start to question, “Maybe this wasn’t the best thing. Maybe I shouldn’t have done this.” And, then, you get to the bottom. It’s dark, and the sun is starting to go down over the canyon. You start getting afraid. You start hearing animals in the bushes. And you think, “I’m going to be food,” or something. And I think every one of us as we engage in a creative project, we all go through these stages, right? Where everything seems really clear. We’re inspired. The path is clear before us. It looks like a direct shot. But once we hike down into the canyon, it starts to get mucky, and difficult, and a little bit frightening. And I think in those moments, especially in the bottom of the canyon, when it’s really easy for us to lose hope and to give up. And one of the reasons is because we’re isolated, because we don’t have people around us. We don’t have people who can help us stay aligned and remind us why we’re doing this again.

But I think there are a couple of other forces that can really play out as well. I mean, one of them is pretty obvious. It’s been discussed a lot. But I think we often don’t consider its implications is fear. And fear is when the perceived consequences of failure outweigh the perceived benefits of success. So, we don’t act. We don’t try things. We don’t experiment. We don’t take little risks. We kind of lose hope. We become afraid of things that probably would not have been frightening to us when we were on the rim of the canyon, right? But now that we’re in the bottom of the canyon, we start to wonder, “Maybe I was wrong. Maybe this was a really bad idea to do this.” And we become

paralyzed. We get those little voices in our head. We hearing people talking about all of the terrible things that are going to happen to us if this project fails. So, we become paralyzed by that which kind of leads into the second thing that can happen to us. We can become paralyzed by narratives, by false narratives in our head.

I don't know about you, but when I'm writing – I've now published three books in five years? Which sounds absolutely insane when I say it like that. But as I'm writing there are these little sort of chattering voices in the back of my head saying, "Oh, there goes a one-star Amazon review." "Up, boy, they're really going to love that. That's going to be great [said sarcastically]". Right? As I'm writing, or even writing a guest post for your site, as I'm writing that I'm thinking, "Boy, are you sure? I don't want to let anybody down. I want to make sure this is right. I want to make sure it resonates." You know? In the back of your mind you've got these little chattering voices that are calling into question your instincts, your intuition, your skills, or all of these things. It's like the Imposter Syndrome thing that everybody thinks, by the way, the Imposter Syndrome goes away once you achieve any measure of success. And I think anybody who would tell you who has achieved a measure of success what's really going on in their head, I think they would say, "Absolutely not." In fact, it only amplifies once you have something to protect, right? And I'm sure you've experienced this, and you've had a lot of success with your books, and people think, "Well, it's easy for Jeff, because look at Jeff. I mean Jeff sold lots of copies of his books. And look at Jeff. I mean, Jeff's got a publishing deal. Look at Jeff, he's got all of these followers and stuff." And people think it's easy for you. But the reality is that, I'm sure, that in some measure in the back of your mind there is some voice telling you, "But you have to protect what you've already built, right?" And, "Are you sure you want to risk that? Are you sure you want to take that step? Are you sure you want to do a live event? Are you sure you want to....", you know? And in the back of your mind all of these things start playing out. And that certainly happens to me.

And, then, the third thing that can happen to us in the bottom of the valley is we're moving toward our objective can cause us to get off course in developing our voice is just plain and simple inertia. Right? It's so easy for us to circle the wagons. It's so easy for us to stay in a place of relative comfort and to stagnate. And I believe the love of comfort is often the enemy of greatness in our lives. I think the people who build brilliant bodies of work they can be proud of, they can point to and say, "Yes, that represents me," are people who do the hard thing even when it's the uncomfortable thing, that they do the right thing, right? That they continue to persist, and they continue to climb.

And, so, these forces can very easily trap us, and paralyze us, and keep us in the place of stasis, convince us – by the way fear often comes disguised as wisdom which I think is really difficult for people who want to do great work. Because there are a lot of people in your life who will tell you things that sound like wisdom in the moment, but they are actually a reflection of their own fears. There are people who will, especially this is true in the organizations, people who will tell you to stay close to the middle, to not follow your gut, to not take risks with your work. Mostly because your action will be an indictment of their stasis, right? Your action will be an indictment of all of those times when they failed to follow their intuition, failed to follow their gut.

And at the same time, Jeff, there are people who will tell you to run off a cliff. "Yeah, you do it. Go jump off a cliff," right? "Go take those blind, stupid risks. Sure, you're going to be the next *American Idol*," right? Even though the reality is that your skills and your passions don't reflect that. And we're not looking for that either. We're looking for people who will truly and deeply know us and

encourage us. And we have to be careful not to in any capacity mistake these voices of fear, or these narratives, or the forces of inertia for wisdom. Because they often disguise themselves as wisdom.

Anyway, so, we have to be careful not to let them paralyze us from developing our voice.

J I love that. It reminds me of when I worked for a nonprofit in my early 20s. And I became marketing director within like the first year and a half of being there. And I had all these people – some like 24, maybe, all these people who were basically twice my age coming to me saying, “Hey, it’s great that you have all these new ideas,” or “Our founder really likes you right now, but we just want to tell you, this isn’t going to last.” And I would have people kind of pull me aside and kind of try to communicate wisdom to me which is, “This isn’t going to last. You’re kind of the new pet project, and this new program, or this new department” – I started a marketing department from scratch, “It’s not going to last. We’ve seen this before.”

T Uh-huh (yes).

J And I took that as a dare [laughing]. I was like, “Well, I’ll show you.” And, obviously, there actually was kind of some truth to that. They’d been around a lot longer than I had. And they’d seen some things that I hadn’t seen. And there was truth to it. But here’s the thing. All those people who told me, “Hey, you need to play it safe,” and “Don’t be too audacious,” or “Don’t expect this to last,” in the next couple of years they all were gone. A lot of them were let go or left, because they – it wasn’t working for them anymore. And that just reminded me of that. Stasis is sometimes it feels like the safest thing, but there is a risk in standing still as well.

T Unquestionably, and the other thing I would add to that is just that every lie has a tinge of the truth in it, right? For every lie that is told to you, there is probably a little bit of truth. It only takes a little bit of truth to gain traction. So, that’s why it’s important, again, that you have people around you to keep you aligned and help you stay focused on what matters. And remind you who you are. We discover our voice in the context of community. People think it’s this solo venture. It’s me against the world. And that’s just not reflective how it really happens. If you look at the lives of contributors and artists. Now, there are exceptions to every rule. And people will point to those exceptions and say, “What about this person, or this person?” There are always going to be unicorns that walk among us.

But if you look at the vast number of people who are doing great work out there, it’s been a community effort. It’s people around them helping them over time to develop their intuition, develop their voice.

J Love that. Love unicorns, too. We’re not anti-unicorn for the record.

T We’re not anti-unicorn.

J I mean, I just want to take a moment and thank our sponsor, Uni-Wax, the only horn waxing kit for white-tailed unicorns. So, I just want to make sure we get that endorsement in there [Laughing]. It’s important. They’re sponsoring this show. I want to keep everybody happy. So, Todd—

T By the way, I just snorted for the first time in five years.

J You’re welcome.

T Just point that out.

J You're welcome.

[Music playing]

J You wrote in your book, you said, "Developing your authentic voice is not just about personal gratification, it's about achieving impact." This – I mean this is just resonating with me across the board because, again, I think that we tend to believe that our voice is like what feels good right now. And I can't tell you how many conversations where I want to slam my head against a wall with writers are artists, are creatives, working for themselves or working for organizations basically complaining because the man, or the market, or whatever doesn't want to let them do what they want to do. And they think that's their voice. I love that you've expanded this to really talk about your voice is a means for creating impact. It's not just about personal gratification, about feeling good. It's about achieving impact. And you have this thing called *The Voice Engine*. And I love this book, because it's really practical. And I'm basically asking you to give away the farm here, but you're a generous guy.

T [Laughing]. I am more than willing to do that. I don't do these interviews to just – honestly, I do them, because I want to help.

J I know you do. What is *The Voice Engine*? Can you break that down for us?

T Yeah, so there are three – it's funny, because I started – I'm sure you discovered this as a writer as well. I'm sure many of the people listening are writers. You start with a hypothesis, and you have the research in these kind of categories that you're writing against. Especially in nonfiction. And, then, as you write, you discover that there are maybe higher-order patterns at work. And that's kind of what happened with this book. Because I started with these kind of markers of resonance that I was discovering at the 10,000-foot level. And they were authenticity, uniqueness, precision, consonance, empathy, timing, these kind of markers that seem to be present. And as I stepped back and continued to look at it, I realized, there are actually three kind of higher-order patterns at work here.

And they came to be known as *The Voice Engine*. Because they drive the development of compelling and resonant voices. So, the three components are, first of all, identity which is the ability to answer the question, "Who are you?" Now, for some people it's obvious. I know who I am. Well, do you really? Do you really stop to think about how you're approaching your work? Do you think about where you are especially resonant? Do you think about the kinds of environmental cues that cause you to be especially connected to your work, or to pour yourself, invest yourself into your work in unique ways? \

So, I talk in the book about these two markers of resonance within identity. The first one is authenticity which is, by the way, probably the most overused word of 2015, authenticity.

J [Laughing].

T But I think we think of authenticity as transparency, or vulnerability. I'm going to open the kimono, and I hope you like what you see. If you don't, then that's too bad.

J Yeah.

J But the reality is there is another dimension to authenticity that we don't really address often, and that is the degree to which you are invested in your work. Do people believe that you really care about what you're saying? Do they believe that you have skin in the game? And, can they see that? And as a writer, that is really, really important especially as a writer. The people not only can see that you are making a good argument, or not only see that your logic is airtight, or whatever.

But do you really believe what you're saying? And are you really putting yourself into what you're doing? And this is important. It's important that we be able to identify that for ourselves. Because if we don't identify it for ourselves, it's hard for us to communicate it in our work.

And, then, the second element of identity is uniqueness. And this is about making bold decisions in the face of uncertainty. What sets you apart from other people is your willingness to make bold, intuitive leaps in the face of your uncertainty. And many people are not willing to do that with their work. And they stay very close to the middle. They stay very close to the crowd, because it's much, much safer when you're close to the crowd, and especially in the face of uncertainty. Or we keep our options open for as long as possible. And, then, boom, we make a decision at the last minute. To decide comes from the root word that means to cut off. So, when we make a decision, it means that we're cutting off other options. And that's what great artists do. Making great art is making bold decisions in the face of your uncertainty. And they may be the wrong decision by the way. But that's the role of the artist, to decide.

And, so, those are two elements of identity that we can look at. And if you look at amazing artists, people who are resonating, great writers, even great leaders, they have those two elements present. They're invested in their work, and you can see that they're invested in their work. And there is something about their work that indicates that they're making bold, unique decisions with their work in the face of uncertainty.

And the second element of *The Voice Engine* is vision. So, we have identity. Then we have vision. And vision is about the impact that you want your work to have. Some people think, "My voice is all about me. It's about what I want to do." If you drill down on what makes me feel good and if people like it, they do. If they don't, they don't. And that's fine if you don't really care if people pay attention to what you do. But if you really want your work to resonate, if you want it to connect with people – and I hope you do. I mean I do. I work really hard at what I do. I want it to connect. Then you have to have a vision for your work which means you have to define your intended audience, and you have to cultivate, you have to develop empathy for your intended audience so that you're able to connect with them in a deep way and make your message resonate. You have to understand where you want to lead them with your work. What change do you want to inspire in them? How do you want to mobilize them?

And this is the difference by the way between attention and impact. Anybody can crank out memes. Well, not anybody, but if they worked hard enough they could crank out memes or click bait, and all of these things are going to get you a lot of attention in the short run. And maybe you can monetize them or whatever. You get some short-term attention. But you're not going to be generating any kind of longterm impact. And this is the difference, right? You have to be willing to forego sometimes a little bit of short-term attention in order to achieve longterm impact. You have to have a vision that you're working against. So, this is kind of the second element. And, briefly, grazing over that.

We'll jump over to the third one. The third one is mastery. So, identity, vision, mastery. Mastery is about owning your craft, becoming a master of your craft, and cultivating the ability to perform when it counts most. If you have a great sense of identity, and a great sense of vision, but you're not a master of your craft, you haven't mastered the domain that you're operating in, the platform that you have, you're not going to be credible. People aren't going to pay attention to you.

So, Jeff, you can have the best ideas about how to discover your calling, about how to pursue your calling, and all of that. And you can have a vision for what you want to do, but if your writing is terrible, nobody is going to read it. Nobody is going to pay attention to you, right? Because they're not going to be able to process your ideas.

So, we have to become a master of our platform. And this is really about, I mentioned empathy before, which is a skill that we can develop. We can cultivate empathy. But it's also about developing a sense of timing and understand how we can connect our ideas with a context that helps it gain traction in the marketplace. So, these three areas: identity, vision, mastery are like an engine. And they all feed into one another. Because as we understand who we are more, it helps us shape our vision, and our vision helps us understand the skills we have to master. And as we master skills we learn more about ourselves which feeds into our identity, and they kind of create this virtuous upward cycle as we commit ourselves to developing our voice over time.

J So, Todd, you mentioned something that I don't want to gloss over here. You talked about audience. And I know a lot of writers, especially creatives, who would really struggle with that. I like that you kind of distinguished, we're focusing on impact not on attention. But that the focus of our work is to make an impact, it is to connect it with other people. And I think that's challenging for some people. And towards the end of the book you get really practical. And you lay out these three responsibilities.

The first responsibility is you say we have a responsibility to our stakeholders. Now, wait a minute, Henry.

T [Laughing].

J I'm a writer. I'm a creative. I don't have any stakeholders, do I?

T Sure you do. Absolutely. I mean if you are so – if you're somebody who works in an organization, you absolutely have stakeholders, right? These are the people who are paying you to do a job. You're not just being paid to sit around all day and come up with stuff. Like you're being paid to do a job, to deliver against objectives. If you are a creative who is creating work on your own, if you're a freelancer, you probably have clients. And those are your stakeholders. If you're writing books – as somebody who writes a book, I have stakeholders. I mean Penguin pays me money to write books. And I have a book deal, right? With them. They're certainly a stakeholder. But more than that, my readers are stakeholders in my work. I am asking my readers to invest time in reading my book.

Most people don't balk at the \$12, \$15, \$17 it cost to buy a book. They balk at the hours and hours you're asking them to invest. That is the most precious investment that somebody can make. And, so, if I'm asking somebody to invest their finite, focused attention, time, their energy into my ideas, they absolutely become a stakeholder in my work, right? Because I'm asking them to spend their most precious resources.

J I think you're right in that we do have stakeholders. We have people who are depending on us. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Like you said, these are responsibilities. And I think that as a creative it's sometimes challenging to think that I am not only responsible to the work that I do, I'm responsible for the work that I do. And along those lines, you talk about the second responsibility being the responsibility to yourself. What do you mean by that?

T Yeah, so, I think a lot of people compromise, because they have a responsibility to their stakeholders, and they begin to pander to their stakeholders exclusively. I see this inside of organizations all the time. People just kind of – it's like teaching the test, right, in school. I see people doing this in organizations where they're just creating whatever they think their stakeholders are going to like. And it's fine. And they don't ever take risks with their work. We also have a responsibility to ourselves, to follow our intuition and to follow our gut about the things that matter to us. That's why identity is so important. We need to have a strong-rooted sense of what we care about, the values, principles that we're going to go to the mat for every single time, the values that we're going to infuse in our work, the things that are unique to us that we're going to invest ourselves in so they become apparent in our work. Do people see what you stand for? And this is important as well. This is the second responsibility that we have.

But there's also a third responsibility, too. And this one is a little bit more mystical and ineffable. This is kind of venturing more into the Thomas Merton territory, right? But this is a responsibility to the work itself, or to the idea. And what I mean by that is, as you examine any project – and I don't know if you had this experience with books, I've certainly had this experience with books. The book kind of has a life of its own. There's something the book wants to become. And as you work in the book, and as you kind of look at how things come together, there's kind of a trajectory that the book wants to take. And I think that we have to be willing to ask the question, what does this want to be? What does the space that this work wants to occupy?

And I think we have to listen to that as well, because it is so easy to shape a project so that it matches what we care about, you know? Or to shape a project so that it only matches our stakeholders. But I think every project is introduced into a context with opportunities, limitations, unique resources, all of these things. So, I think we have to ask, what does this want to become? In an ideal world, where would this project want to go? And I think we have a responsibility to the work as well.

J Yeah. I love that Madeleine L'Engle quote where she says, "You have to write the book that wants to be written."

T Hum.

J That's absolutely true. I hear my friends who write fiction that's especially true when you're telling a story. And they talk about – we're having lunch, and they talk about their characters wanting to do this or that. And I'm like, "You sound a little bit like a crazy person." [Laughing].

T [Laughing].

J But I get it. As you were talking about writing this book you sort of arbitrarily say, "Here's the thing that I think I want to say, because the publisher made me write a book proposal, but I know as

soon as I write this thing, it's going to blow up and become whatever it needs to become." If you're writing honestly, I think that's inevitable.

T And I think that is the key point that you just made. The job of the artist, the job of the writer, is to tell the truth. And every writer has to cross a line at some point where they say, "I am going to write what I believe to be true even though it's not what I wish was true."

J Uh-huh (yes).

T And I think every artist, every writer has to have the courage to do what's right even though it's not what's expedient. And that, I believe, is the line between impact and attention. I think the difference between those who actually resonate connected deeply and mobilized people is that the people who do those things are the ones who choose to tell the truth. And it may not garner as much short-term attention, but in the end, number one, they're going to sleep a lot better at night. Maybe not on beds full of money.

J [Laughing]

T But they'll sleep a lot better at night. And in the end they can point to a body of work and say, "Yes, that represents me. That represents the best I can do with what I had. That represents my passions, my skills, my experiences, the best of who I am. My intuition. I didn't compromise in order to gain a little more short-term attention. Instead, I built a body of work I can be proud of." And, frankly, that's what I'm aiming for with my life and with my work. I want to be able to point to a delta, a change, in 20 – 30 years if I'm blessed to live that long. I want to point to a delta and say, "That represents me. I did work that represents me. I told the truth. I did the best I could do with what I was given." I think that's all of us can ask for in the end.

J Yeah.

[Music playing].

J This is what I love about you, Todd, is I remember seeing you speak at a conference, gosh, probably four or five years ago now. And you're not just paving the path for success. You're calling us to do our best work. And I feel like you're doing it in some very practical ways. I think there are lots of people that talk about this in kind of an ethereal way. But I love this. You are giving us conceptual stuff that I find challenging at work when I'm sitting at my computer, but also when I go home and I think about the body of work that I'm creating, the thing that I'm doing with my life is really the same thing. It's just in a variety of different contexts. And it's who I am and how I'm expressing that in all these different places.

I want to close with this question, because it's been fun to, frankly, watch your success over the past several years, really kind of beginning with you speaking at that conference, *The Accidental Creative*, the book had just come out, and I don't really know where you were like businesswise, but to me as an outsider looking in, I saw that as sort of the first significant step, or a significant step of saying, "This is my voice, and I want to share it." Because, you, as we mentioned at the beginning of the show, you had been doing this podcast for years, now a decade. And you were stepping out and saying, "I have something that I want to say." And I'm curious, how has your voice, as you understand

it, changed over the past several years? And how can we expect our own voices to change and evolve as we begin to better understand ourselves?

T Ah, that is such a great question, such a great question. We could have started the conversation with this and talked for an hour, right? We develop our voice in layers. And success comes in layers. And we hit inflexion points in our life, in our career. And often I think we think, as I did many times even before I first met you, all those years ago, what? Five years ago now, six years ago.

J I think so, yeah.

T There were probably three or four moments before that when I thought, "OK. This is it. OK. This is the moment. This is the inflexion point. OK. A major national magazine is writing an article about you. This is it, right?" OK. That wasn't it.

J [Laughing].

T OK. This is it. It's a big deal. You're going to speak in front of thousands and thousands of people at this thing, and it's a huge thing. That's it. OK. That wasn't it.

J [Laughing].

T OK. You signed a book deal. That's it. Your first book came out. That's it. No, that wasn't it. Well, OK, you've got another book deal. This is it. And the thing is, I think that we often think that success is an event. And in reality success is a process. And if you ask people that you look at from the outside, when did you become successful? I think most people will look at you with this really inquisitive look, because I don't think most people who are experiencing a measure of success necessarily think of themselves as successful. I think that they are continuing that journey that they began who knows how long before. And, of course, there is a point at which it's pretty obvious. It's hard to deny success, right?

J Yeah.

T But I'm sure, Jeff, if I turned the tables on you and said, "Jeff, when did you become a success?" I think you would be like, "What do you mean? I'm still working. I'm still striving. I'm still trying to create impact. I'm still trying too," right? Because success comes in layers.

J I feel pretty successful.

T That's awesome.

J [Laughing]

T And you should. Rightly, you should. But what I'm saying is, I think from the outside we look at people, and I think that we think success is about an event. You cross a threshold, and there you are. You hit an inflexion point. And the reality is, I think it happens in layers. I think that it comes over time. And this is the same way with developing your voice. You ask, "How has my voice changed?" I think it's more nuanced. I think I'm more empathetic. I think I'm more understanding. I'm probably less certain, because I have a lot more data. There's a lot of bliss that comes with ignorance, I think when you're first doing something. And you think, "Oh, this is it. It's so clear. It's right in front of me."

And I think that the more data you have in front of you, the more nuanced your understanding becomes. But it's still the role of the writer, and the artist, and the communicator to be clear even when you're not certain, right? To speak the truth, to speak to what you see even when you're not absolutely certain about something. Because that's what we do. Because the reality is, there is very little we can be certain about in this world, other than maybe mathematics.

And, so, I think that's a fantastic question. But I think really if anything my voice is more nuanced. It's more layered. But the kindling, the fire, the core ethic of what I do, the freedom fighter for the creative professional, the arms dealer for the creative revolution. We're championing the underdog. We're striving to try to have their work and seen and respected by their organization, or by the world. That has fueled me from day one. It's that drive to really walk alongside arm in arm with the creative pro and help the David beat the Goliath.

And, so, I think that the core driver of my voice, the understanding of who I am and what I do, is the same. But I think I'm probably just more nuanced in how I understand it and how I communicate it now. But my passion has not waned. If anything, the flames have only grown stronger over time.

J Brilliant. Mr. Todd Henry. It's always a pleasure. Selfishly, I just learned a lot. So, I'm going to go do better, more authentic work. And if you want to do the same, pick up Todd's book. *Louder than Words*. Thank you Todd.

T Thank you, Jeff, and thank you for the great work that you continue to put out there in the world. You're an inspiration to me, and to countless tens of thousands other people. So, thank you.

J Thank you for saying that.

[Music playing]

A Are you encouraged, and ready to seek out, and exercise your authentic voice? Well, let us know your thoughts on today's episode with Jeff and the author of *Louder than Words*, Todd Henry. You can drop a comment on this episode at <http://GoinsWriter.com>, or send a Tweet and include the hashtag #Portfolio Life. I'm Andy Traub, and on behalf of Jeff Goins, thanks for spending some time with us. Now, go build your portfolio.

[Music playing]

T And I believe the love of comfort is often the enemy of greatness in our lives. I think the people who build brilliant bodies of work, bodies of work they can be proud of, that they point to and say, "Yes, that represents me!" are people who do the hard thing even when it's the uncomfortable thing, that they do the right thing.

Resources

- [Louder than Words: Harness the Power of Your Authentic Voice](#) by Todd Henry
- Todd Henry's [blog](#)

